

SARS Update for Weekly VHA Call to VISN/Facility Leadership

4/18/03

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continues to investigate the spread of the respiratory illness called severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS.) This week they have issued new interim guidelines for persons in the general workplace. They recommend that people who have traveled to a known SARS area (mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Hanoi) or who have been exposed to a suspect SARS case be especially vigilant for fever (above 100.4 degrees F) or respiratory symptoms (cough or difficulty breathing) for the 10 days following their return (or following their exposure to a case.) If these symptoms develop, the person should not go to work, school, or other public area but should seek evaluation by a health care provider and practice scrupulous infection control precautions in the home including frequent hand washing or use of an alcohol-based hand rub. The patient should cover his or her mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and should wear a surgical mask when in close contact with others. If the patient is unable to wear a mask, then household members should wear one when in contact with the patient. The routine use of surgical masks or respirators and other personal protective equipment is not recommended in the general workplace outside of health care settings. Likewise persons who have been exposed to a SARS patient need not limit their activities outside the home unless they develop symptoms.

VA's SARS website (vaww.vhaco.va.gov/phshcg/SARS/) which is updated regularly, has links to the CDC sites and also includes a SARS wall chart for VA providers and a fact sheet for VA employees, patients and visitors. If a patient or employee is suspected of a SARS diagnosis, please report to both local health officials and VISN leadership.

VAMCs are also reminded that it is desirable for the same employee to re-use the N95 respirators since there is a worldwide shortage of these protective devices. NIOSH has addressed the reuse of N95 Masks and says that if a facility chooses to use disposable respirators as part of their respiratory protection program, their reuse by the same health care worker is permitted as long as the respirator maintains its structural and functional integrity and the filter material is not physically damaged or soiled. The facility must address the circumstances in which a disposable respirator will be considered to be contaminated and not available for reuse. See [TB Respiratory Protection Program in Health Care Facilities: Administrator's Guide](#)* from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health for the complete document.

* <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/99-143.html>